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Reply to: **Tampa, FLORIDA**

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**COAST GUARD HAS RECORD WEEK
WITH OVER 18 AND A-HALF TONS SEIZED
IN ONGOING DRUG OPERATION**

Mac Cauley, United States Attorney for the Middle District of Florida, announced today the unsealing of two Indictments and a third Superseding Indictment after the arrests of nineteen defendants in three separate drug seizures in the eastern Pacific Ocean. The seizures were made by several United States Coast Guard vessels and Coast Guard Boarding Teams aboard U. S. Navy vessels operating in the eastern Pacific Ocean off the coasts of Peru, Guatamala and Costa Rica. The total amount of these seizures is over 18.5 tons, believed to be a record quantity for the Coast Guard for a one week time period.

12.6 Ton Seizure

One of the seizures involves the Colombian flagged fishing vessel Paulo, a seventy foot wooden hulled vessel, with 12.6 tons of cocaine found by the Coast Guard boarding team in the fish holds. The vessel was interdicted off the coast of Peru on Februray 11, 2002 and nine defendants were taken into custody. The defendants are scheduled to make an initial appearance in Federal Court in Tampa this afternoon.

Coast Guard authorities indicate that this constitutes the second largest seizure to date, with the largest being 13.6 tons found by the Coast Guard aboard the fishing vessel SVESDA MARU in April 2001.

2.6 Ton Seizure

On February 3, 2002 a claimed Colombian “go fast” boat was interdicted off the coast of Guatemala carrying more than 2 and-a-half tons of cocaine and four defendants were taken into custody. The defendants have made their initial appearance in Federal Court and are being detained while they await trial.

3.4 Ton Seizure

On February 12, 2002 a claimed Colombian “go fast” boat was interdicted off the coast of Costa Rica with more than 3-tons of cocaine and six defendants were taken into custody. The defendants are scheduled to make their initial appearance in Federal Court in Tampa this afternoon.

The seizures and defendants are being brought to the Middle District of Florida for prosecution by Assistant United States Attorneys who are part of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF). These cases are related to an ongoing drug investigation out of Tampa, Florida, named OPERATION PANAMA EXPRESS.

In two years, over 120 Tons of cocaine have been seized by the Coast Guard or destroyed at sea and 178 defendants arrested as a result of this investigation. Seven additional defendants were arrested in Colombia in December 2001 and are awaiting extradition to the United States. As a note, the Coast Guard has seized over 130 tons of cocaine in the Eastern Pacific in the past two and one-half years.

Mac Cauley, United States Attorney for the Middle District of Florida, applauds the United States Coast Guard for their continued efforts to assist in the investigation, interdictions and apprehensions: “The recent seizures by the Coast Guard are truly remarkable, but particularly in light of a substantial reallocation of their resources to domestic security in light of the events of September 11th. The Coast Guard and our other contributing law enforcement agencies, DEA, FBI, and U.S. Customs Service have endeavored to continue to improve their ability to work together and I believe these seizures demonstrate the results of those efforts.”